



By Colonel Ernie Zuick

t begins with an unidentified blip on a radar screen at a coastal radar site. The blip indicates the unidentified object is 200 miles off the coast of California and heading due east directly towards San Francisco at a speed of 400 miles per hour. Radar operators immediately relay the information to the North American Defense Command's headquarters at Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado. There, the received data are quickly analyzed and a decision is

made whether or not scramble Air Defense fighter interceptors. If the decision is to scramble, the California Air National Guard's 144th Fighter Wing, located in Fresno, will be notified at once, since it has the responsibility for the air defense of California and the entire western region of the United States.

Pilots of the 144th are on alert 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. Once the Fresno unit receives notification of an aerial "intruder," alert

pilots rush to their aircraft and are airborne within five minutes. Their mission is to detect, intercept, identify, and, if ordered to do so, destroy the airborne threat. Each time the alert pilots are scrambled, they are uncertain of what they will encounter. The one thing that is certain, however, is the fact that the 144th Fighter Wing is ready for any contingency that might occur. This elite flying unit has been performing NORAD's Air Defense mission for nearly 50 years, but few people realized the mission's vital importance until 9/11. Major General Dan Gibson, Commander of the California Air National Guard, has stated that a few hours after the attack on America, all of the 144th's F-16 aircraft were fully loaded, sitting at the end of the runway—some with engines running—waiting to be scrambled. Within a

few days following 9/11, the 144th Fighter Wing was one of the first California National Guard units to be federalized. The unit's Combat Air Patrol missions immediately intensified as Fresno's fully-loaded F-16s patrolled critical sites throughout California and the far west. These patrol missions continue today, albeit less frequently.

Pilots of the 144th are some of the most experienced and professional in the military. Even so, they sometimes need a little help

from a friend. This help comes in the form of air refueling aircraft belonging to the Air Force, the Air Force Reserve, or the Air National Guard—giant aerial filling stations that provide jet fuel to the thirsty F-16s as they fly their Air Defense missions.

The 144th's mission is not only extremely sensitive, it is also dangerous, since many of the missions are flown over water in the single-engine F-16 aircraft. Any engine emergency could result in an over water ejection. This is one of the



PHOTO BY KEN JAMES

reasons that the California National Guard is pursuing the acquisition of F-15Cs for the 144th Fighter Wing. The F-15C is the optimum weapons system for the 144th's Air Superiority mission. Its twin-engines, and its more sophisticated radar system, will enhance pilot safety and improve mission capability.

Until acquiring the F-15C aircraft, the 144th Fighter Wing will continue performing its daily Air Defense missions in its F-16s providing Californians and residents of NORAD's western region with the best insurance policy possible—an insurance policy with wings: someone to watch over you.

EDITOR'S NOTE: We thank the Air Force Reserve's 940th Air Refueling Wing for supplying the photo on the opposite page and for its invaluable refuelling support to the California Air National Guard.